Cover: Carved gilt eagle and shield from canopy over Vice President's desk.

The Senate Chamber 1810-1859

The United States Senate
Commission on
Art and Antiquities

Washington, D.C. 20510

S962-1

Looking east from the Diplomatic Gallery in the Old Senate Chamber. In the center is the Vice President's dais, "canopied by crimson drapery, richly embossed, and held by talons of an o'er hovering eagle."

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"I congratulate the people of the United States on the assembling of Congress at the permanent seat of their Government; and I congratulate you, gentlemen, on the prospect of a residence not to be changed. . . . May this Territory be the residence of virtue and happiness!" [1]

Thus, did John Adams address the first joint session of Congress, held in the new capital city of Washington. Adams' welcome of November 22, 1800 to the newly arrived legislators was delivered in the Senate Chamber, then located on the ground floor level of the unfinished Capitol building. When Congress first occupied the Capitol, only the north wing had been completed. For the earliest years of the 19th century this small rectangular building housed the Senate, House of Representatives, Supreme Court, Library of Congress, and local courts.

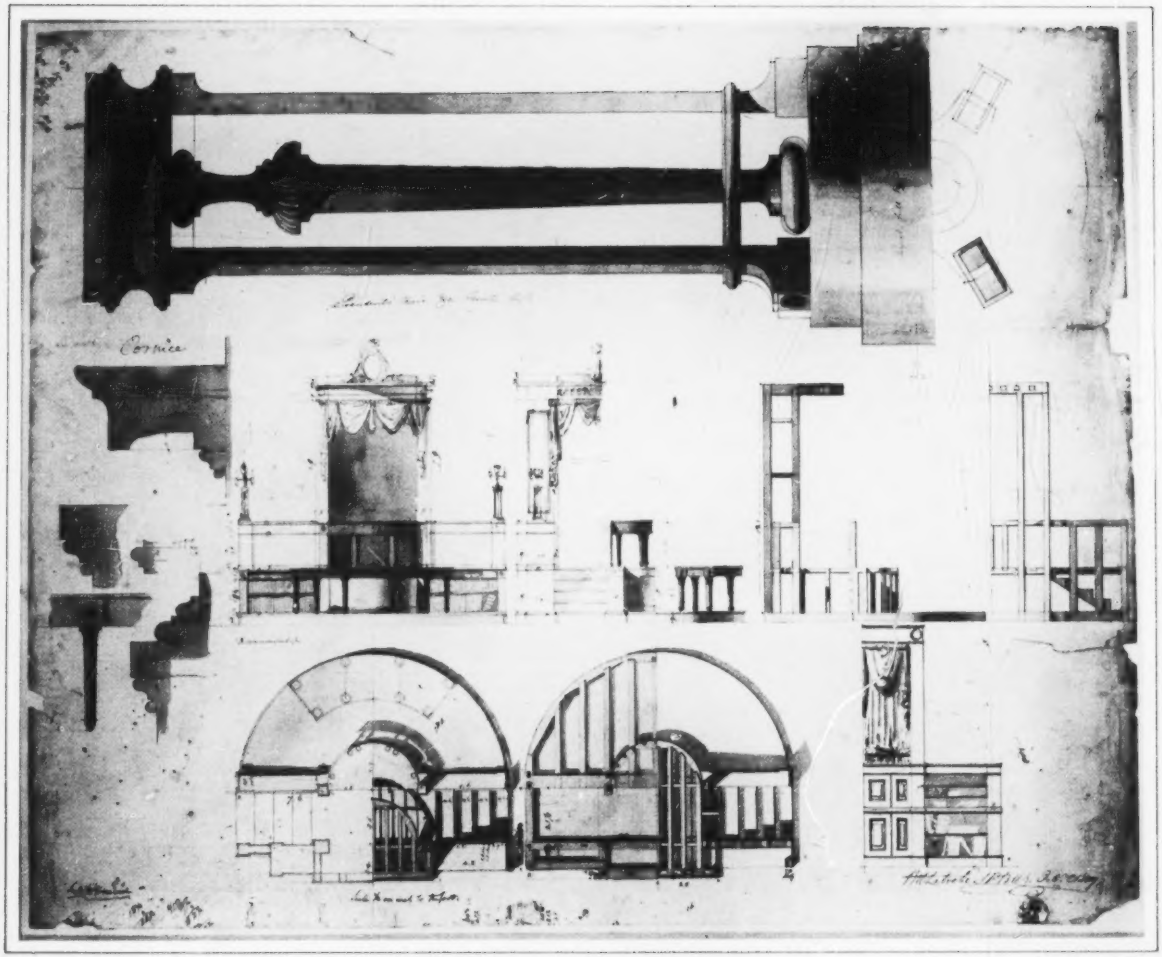
In March 1801, the Senate Chamber was the setting for the inauguration of Thomas Jefferson, the nation's third president. Jefferson took great interest in the construction of Washington's public buildings, especially the Capitol which he called, "the first temple dedicated to the sovereignty of the people." [2] The new President's attempts to encourage architects and to promote architectural education have been properly described as "part of a larger effort to establish the fine arts in this country." In 1803, Jefferson appointed one of the few professionally trained architects in America, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Surveyor of Public Buildings. Latrobe's first task was to construct the south wing of the Capitol for the House of Representatives.[3]

From the time of the cornerstone laying in 1793, several architects had labored with great difficulty on the construction of the Capitol. The original design followed the plans of Washington physician and amateur architect, William Thornton. His simple but elegant concept had met the favor of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Latrobe and his predecessors faced the difficult task of converting a technically imperfect plan to one that was practical and architecturally sound. Modifications were made amid much criticism from Thornton, who had been named a Commissioner of the City of Washington.

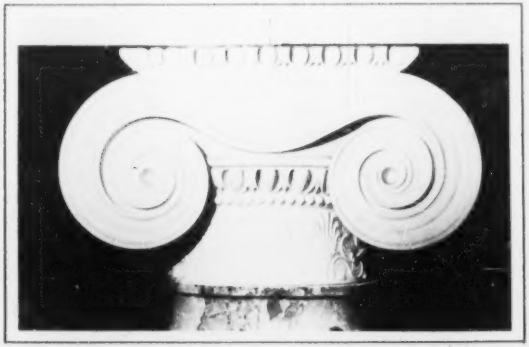
After members of the House of Representatives occupied their handsome chamber in 1807, Benjamin Henry Latrobe turned his attention to the Senate wing. Although it had been in use for less than a decade, dry rot had made many of the timbers unsafe, the roof leaked, and the plaster on the ceilings and columns of the Senate Chamber was altogether unsatisfactory.[4] Latrobe recommended a bold rearrangement of the wing, so that the Senate and the Supreme Court could be more conveniently and safely housed. The architect's new design called for a one-story chamber for the Supreme Court at ground level (in what had been the "floor" of the original Senate meetingplace) with a two-story Senate Chamber located directly above.[5] Heretofore the Court had met in a small committee room in the north wing.

The new construction did not proceed without difficulty. In September 1808, Latrobe's principal assistant, John Lenthall, prematurely removed props supporting the Supreme Court's vaulted ceiling. Lenthall was killed when the ceiling fell, also bringing down the floor of the Senate Chamber.[6] It was not until February 1810 that Senate members of the 11th Congress met in the new chamber on the principal floor of the Capitol.[7]

Upon viewing the elegantly finished room in 1810, a visitor observed that "the drapery, hangings and carpets, and indeed the whole chamber [are] finished in a superior style of splendour and brilliancy." [8] Latrobe used the colors associated with Revolutionary War uniforms—buff and blue—in his decorative treatment of the room. The curtains were blue mantua lined with buff silk and complemented hangings of glazed straw-colored cotton. This setting, however, was short-lived. On August 24, 1814 the British marched on Washington and set fire to the Capitol.



Working drawing for the Senate Chamber by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, October 20, 1809.



Ionic capital, Italian marble c. 1819.

Returning to Washington in 1815 to supervise reconstruction of the Capitol Building, Benjamin Henry Latrobe found the interior gutted, the outer walls scarred and blackened.

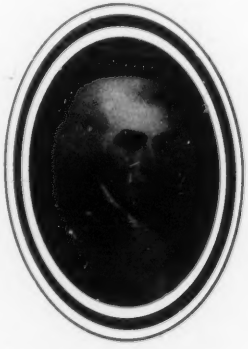
Latrobe reported that damage to the Senate Chamber was extensive, as fire "burnt the marble columns to lime [and] cracked every thing which was of freestone." [9]

During the early months of reconstruction, the 13th Congress met in old Blodget's Hotel near the foot of Capitol Hill. But these quarters were cramped and soon a group of Washingtonians erected a building at the present site of the Supreme Court for the temporary accommodation of the legislature.[10] Remembered as the "Old Brick Capitol," its construction served as a rallying point for those who feared the removal of the seat of government because of general dissatisfaction with the new capital city.[11]

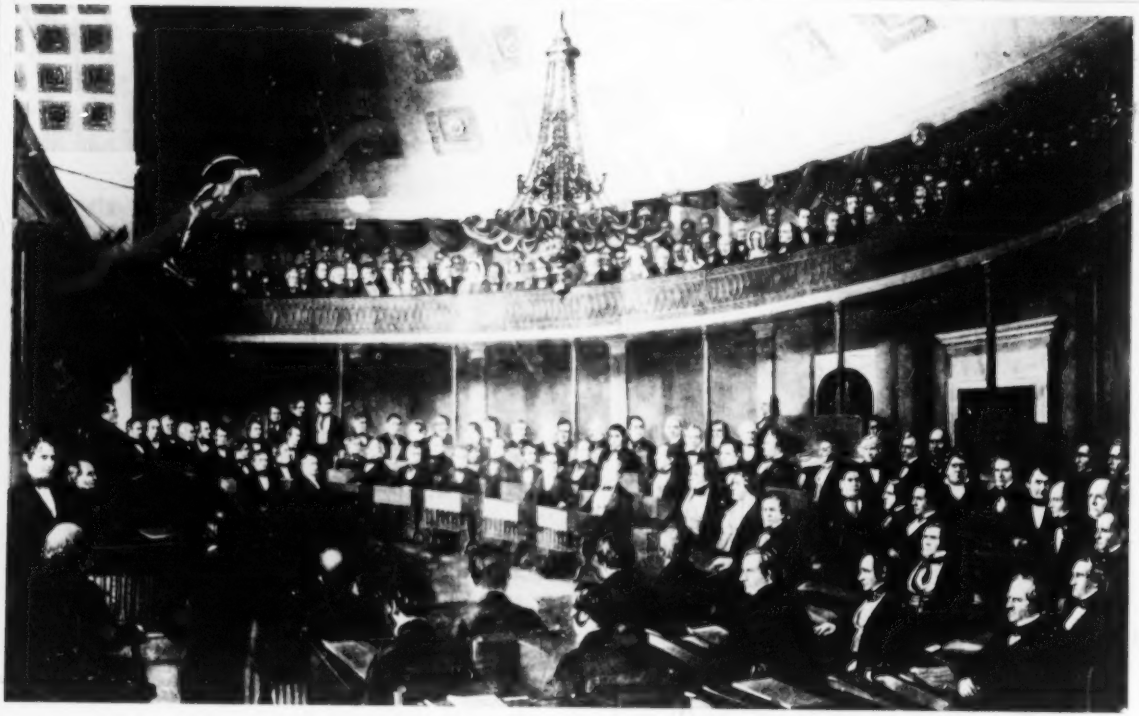
As directed by the Senate, Latrobe enlarged his original design for its chamber and committee rooms. Expansion of the nation was being reflected in space requirements of the legislators. Before destruction of the room in 1814, eight caryatids, symbolic female figures representing national prosperity, had supported a small public gallery.[12] For the enlarged chamber, Latrobe proposed substituting twenty caryatids to represent the number of states in the Union in 1817.[13] Rather than having the caryatids made from freestone, as in the previous room, Latrobe wanted them carved from Italian marble. This preference spotlighted a growing dispute between the architect and the Commissioner of Public Buildings Samuel Lane. The Commissioner felt that the Capitol was becoming too grand and Latrobe's designs were costly and impractical. His view was supported by many members of Congress. Increasing difficulties of this nature forced Benjamin Latrobe to resign his post of Surveyor of the Capitol in 1817. To succeed him, President Madison selected Boston-born Charles Bulfinch, whose acclaimed design of the Massachusetts statehouse made him a logical choice. Although Bulfinch followed much of Latrobe's plan for the Senate Chamber, the elaborate caryatids were not included in the rebuilt room the Senate again occupied in 1819.

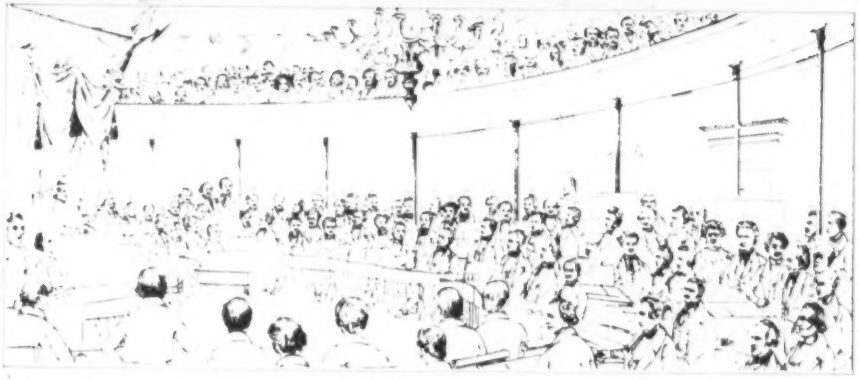
B. Henry Latrobe

The original public gallery was located on the east side of the room, above the Vice President's dais. It was not large enough, however, to accommodate all of the visitors who found the Senate Chamber a popular gathering place. A second and higher gallery was added along the east side of the room during the reconstruction of 1815–1819.[14] But the addition was hot and confining and obstructed the room's gallery-level windows, thus depriving the chamber of much needed daylight. In 1828 the upper gallery was removed and Bulfinch fashioned a graceful semicircular balcony supported by cast-iron columns for the chamber's west side.



Charles Bulfinch





Engraving of the Senate Chamber by Thomas Doney, completed about 1850, is one of the most revealing. Doney collected more than 40 likenesses—from oil paintings and 19th-century daguerreotypes. While the composite provides an invaluable record of scores of distinguished Americans, the individuals represented never appeared in the chamber at the same time. Doney's careful attention to the room's architectural detail was of significant value during the restoration of the Senate Chamber.

Robert Mills' Guide to the Capitol of the United States (1834 edition) described the Senate Chamber as it would appear for the next quarter century.

This is a large semi-circular room, covered with a dome, richly ornamented with deep sunken panels and circular apertures to admit light from above; across the chord of the semi-circle, a screen of columns stretches on each side of the President's chair, which is placed in a niche on an elevated platform, in front of which below are the Secretary and chief clerk's desk. The columns of this screen are of Grecian Ionic order, and composed of the beautiful variegated marble of the Potomac, with caps of Italian white; these, with its entablature, support a gallery: in front of which is another, but lighter gallery, running around the circle of the room, supported by reeded and gilt iron columns, surmounted by a rich gilt iron balustrade. . . . The walls of the Senate Chamber are hung with fluted drapery, placed between pilasters of marble, which extend up to the spring of the cornice. The principal light of this room comes in from the east; but there is, in addition, a borrowed light from above. The [Vice President's] chair is placed on the line of the diameter of the circle, and from this, as a centre, the Senators' desks describe concentred curves, cut by radii, which form the aisles. These desks are all of mahogany, and single, each with a large arm-chair; they are placed on platforms, gradually rising one above the other. . . .

The Senate Chamber is of the same general form with the Halls of Representatives, but has the advantage of plain walls and few recesses; consequently it is a good speaking and hearing room. The dome is very flat. The dimensions of the Chamber are as follows: 75 feet in its greatest length, or diameter, 45 feet in its greatest width, and 45 feet high.[15]

By mid-19th century the Union had grown to 31 states. To accommodate the ever-increasing number of legislators, Congress approved a plan to extend the Capitol Building by adding north and south wings. Dominating each new wing would be an enlarged legislative chamber. Consequently, on January 4, 1859 the Senate, with great pomp and ceremony, took leave of its historic meetingplace and proceeded to the present Senate Chamber. The Old Senate Chamber would serve as the Supreme Court Chamber from 1860 until 1935, when the court moved to its present building. Since 1935, the chamber has been used infrequently for congressional committee meetings. It also served as the Senate's temporary meetingplace during repairs and reconstruction of the present Senate Chamber's roof in 1940, 1949 and 1950.

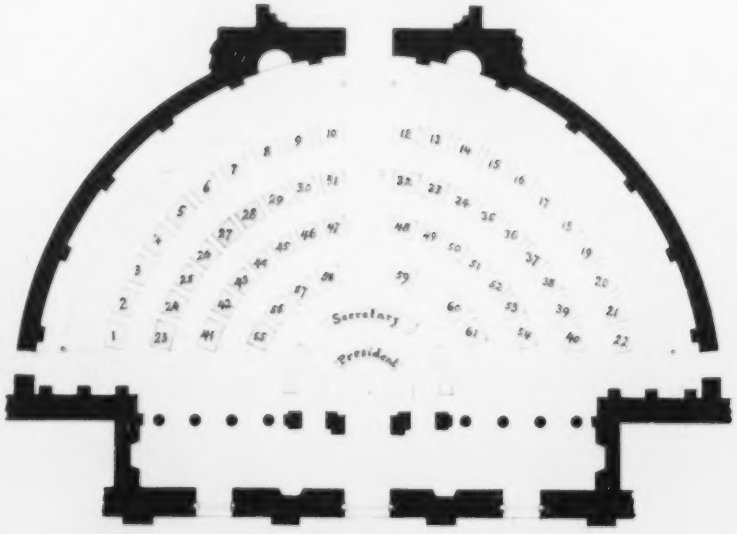
The Senate Chamber was a popular gathering place in the 19th century.

It has been said that for Washington women status was determined by the frequency of one's appearances in the halls of Congress. The many visits to the Senate gallery of the celebrated Dolley Madison, give evidence of this tradition.

A diary entry by Washington hostess, Margaret Bayard Smith, captured some of the excitement of the Webster-Hayne debate of 1830:

The Senate Chamber, is the present arena and never were the amphitheaters of Rome more crowded by the highest ranks of both sexes than the senate chamber. Every seat, every inch of ground, even the steps were compactly filled, and yet not space enough for the ladies—the Senators were obliged to relinquish their chairs of State to the fair auditors who literally sat in the Senate. One lady sat in Col. Hayne's seat, while he stood by her side speaking. I cannot but regret that this dignified body should become such a scene of personality and popular resort, it was supposed yesterday that there were 300 ladies besides their attendant beaux on the floor of the Senate. The two galleries were crowded to overflowing with the People, and the house of Reprs. quite deserted. Our government is becoming every day more and more democratic, the rulers of the people are truly their servants and among those rulers women are gaining more than their share of power.[16]

1 Wm H. Seward
2 Henry Clay
3 Wm C. Dawson
4 J. M. Berrien
5 W. L. Dayton
6 W. F. Mangum
7 Wm Upham
8 J. W. Miller
9 J. A. Pearce
10 S. A. Douglas
11
12 D. Sturgeon
13 D. R. Atchison
14 H. S. Foote
15 W. R. King
16 J. M. Mason
17 S. U. Downs
18 H. Hamlin
19 T. H. Benton
20 D. L. Yulee
21 Henry Dodge
22 A. C. Dodge
23 John Wales
24 P. Spruance
25 J. R. Underwood
26 Thomas Corwin
27 John Davis
28 Cav. E. Badger
29 Daniel Webster
30 S. S. Phelps
31 A. C. Greene
32 Lewis Cass
33 T. J. Rusk
34 James Whitcomb
35 J. C. Calhoun
36 Jeff. Davis
37 J. W. Bradbury
38 W. K. Sebastian
39 P. Soulé
40 A. Pitch
41 James Cooper
42 J. P. Hale
43 R. S. Baldwin
44 J. H. Clarke
45 John Pell
46 Geo W. Jones
47 Truman Smith
48 S. Berland
49 H. L. Turney
50 A. P. Butler
51 J. D. Bright
52 R. M. T. Hunter
53 D. S. Dickinson
54 I. P. Walker
55 S. Houston
56 S. P. Chase
57 J. Sturdivant
58 James Mercer
59 Thos. G. Pratt
60 Moses Mercer
61 J. Clemens



PLAN OF THE SENATE CHAMBER

IVT SESSION . XXIIVT CONGRESS.

1850.

Senators generally took the business at hand more seriously. James Fenimore Cooper observed that debate in the Senate was "particularly dignified." [17] Members dressed in somber, swallow-tailed coats. The image conveyed was one of "gravity incarnate." John C. Calhoun always wore "plain black clothing," and Henry Clay was an impressive figure on the Senate floor in "well-cut broadcloth, gleaming shirt-front and high white collar and cravat." Daniel Webster affected the revolutionary colors of buff and blue, appearing in blue coat and pantaloons with a buff vest. [18] An exception to the rule was Sam Houston of Texas. A most colorful Member in dress as well as life-style, Senator Houston's wardrobe included a panther-skin waistcoat, large Mexican sombrero, brightly colored serape, and flaming red vest. [19] Spectators took particular delight in watching Houston whittle small wooden hearts from lengths of pine and having them distributed to women in the gallery. [20]

The Senate of this era was considered the American institution closest to an "aristocratic assembly." Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America* that the Senate Chamber "contains within a small space a large proportion of the celebrated men of America. Scarcely an individual is to be seen in it who has not had an active and illustrious career: the Senate is composed of eloquent advocates, distinguished generals, wise magistrates, and statesmen of note, whose arguments would do honor to the most remarkable parliamentary debates of Europe." [21]

Senators worked hard to affect style and elegance. Snuff taking for example, was elevated to a fine art. Henry Clay, who was admired for his "grace and ease" in taking snuff, used it as a clever political signal. [22] Vice President Martin Van Buren noted on one occasion that "Mr. Clay left his seat, on one of his snuff taking expeditions, his common resort, when anything was going on of which he wished to wash his hands, and occupied his time in badinage." [23]

Mrs. Frances Trollope described another common practice in the Senate Chamber. The

Sam Houston whittling a length of pine in the Senate Chamber

English writer observed in *Domestic Manners of the Americans* that "the senators, generally speaking, look like gentlemen. . . . I would I could add they do not spit, but alas! 'I have an oath in heaven,' and may not write an untruth. [24] Because of the prevalence of tobacco-chewing, a cuspidor was placed by every desk in the room.

In the gallery, hand-lettered signs cautioned Mrs. Trollope and other visitors not to put their feet on the railing, "as the dirt from them falls upon the Senators' heads." [25] Visitors also ringed the outer perimeter or "lower circle" of the Senate floor. English observer Harriet Martineau took special note of a group of Cherokee chiefs standing in the center of the "circle." [26] They had come to listen to Henry Clay uphold their right to have the Supreme Court hear their grievances. One of the most memorable visits occurred on December 9, 1824, when "General Lafayette was conducted into the Senate Chamber and formally introduced . . . whereupon the Senators rose and remained standing till [Lafayette] was seated, and then adjourned in order that they might have an opportunity to present their respects to him individually." [27]

Robert Mills commented that, "The deficiency of space for visitors in this room is very sensibly felt during the session of Congress; for such has always been the attraction here, that the galleries and lobbies are often crowded to excess, much to the annoyance of the Senate. The access to these galleries has been often objected to, particularly by the ladies; and hence, they are mostly crowded in upon the Senate." [28] Prompted by this situation, the Senate by resolution in 1835 reserved one-third of the red-draped circular gallery for the exclusive use of women. [29]

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The Senate, during its residence in this chamber, grew in stature from a small advisory council to the primary forum for the great national debates of the mid-19th century.

Unlike the larger House of Representatives with its predominately northern and western membership, the Senate maintained a balance between slaveholding and non-slaveholding states. Its relatively small size, ranging from 46 to 64 Members during the period, facilitated open and unlimited debate. In this chamber, to the resonance of impassioned oratory, compromises were forged that held the Union together in the four decades prior to the Civil War.

When the Senate reoccupied the chamber in 1819 it was confronted with a crisis over the introduction of slavery into the westen territories. The House had voted to admit Missouri as a free state, but the Senate objected and the issue became deadlocked. After three months debate, Congress adopted Illinois Senator Jesse B. Thomas' amendment permitting slavery in Missouri but prohibiting its future spread north of the 36°30' line of latitude. Maine then entered the Union as a free state to preserve the sectional balance and complete the Missouri Compromise.

In 1830 Senators Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina and Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, met in dramatic confrontation over the issue of "Nullification." Vice President John C. Calhoun presided over the debates during which Hayne maintained the rights of the states to nullify federal laws, viewing the Union as a compact of sovereign states. In ringing oratory, Webster proclaimed the nationalistic intentions of the founding fathers and the Constitution, concluding

"Webster Replying to Hayne," painted by G. P. A. Healy, 1851.

with "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable." [30]

The Webster-Hayne debate attracted national attention. Washington hotels were crowded with persons who had come from remote parts of the country to hear what they expected to be a "remarkable discourse." Charles W. March, a Washington journalist, described the scene at the Capitol on the first day of Webster's response to Hayne:

As early as nine o'clock of this morning, crowds poured into the Capitol, in hot haste; at 12 o'clock the hour of meeting, the Senate Chamber,—its galleries, floor and even lobbies,—was filled to its utmost capacity. The very stairways were dark with men, who hung to one another, like bees in a swarm.

The House of Representatives was early deserted. An adjournment would have hardly made it emptier. The Speaker, it is true, retained his chair, but no business of moment was, or could be, attended to. Members all rushed in to hear Mr. Webster, and no call of the House or other Parliamentary proceedings could compel them back. The floor of the Senate was so densely crowded, that persons once in could not get out, nor change their positions; in the rear of the Vice-Presidential chair, the crowd was particularly intense . . . a Representative from Alabama became wedged in here. From his enormous size, it was impossible for him to move without displacing a vast portion of the multitude. Unfortunately too, for him, he was jammed in directly behind the chair of the Vice-President, where he could not see, and hardly hear, the speaker. By slow and laborious effort—pausing occasionally to breathe—he gained one of the windows, which, constructed of painted glass, flank the chair of the Vice-President on either side. Here he paused, unable to make more headway. But determined to see Mr. Webster as he spoke, with his knife he made a large hole in one of the panes of the glass. . . . Many were so placed, as not to be able to see the speaker at all.

The courtesy of the Senators accorded to the fairer sex room on the floor—the most gallant of them, their own seats. The gay bonnets and brilliant dresses threw a varied and picturesque beauty over the scene, softening and embellishing it.[31]

The subject of the debates widened the split between the followers of Calhoun, who favored Nullification, and those of President Andrew Jackson, a Unionist. In 1832 the Senate was evenly divided for and against approval of Jackson's nominee, Martin Van Buren, to become ambassador to England. In a rare exhibition of the Vice President's power as President of the Senate, Calhoun cast the tie-breaking vote to defeat his rival, Van Buren.

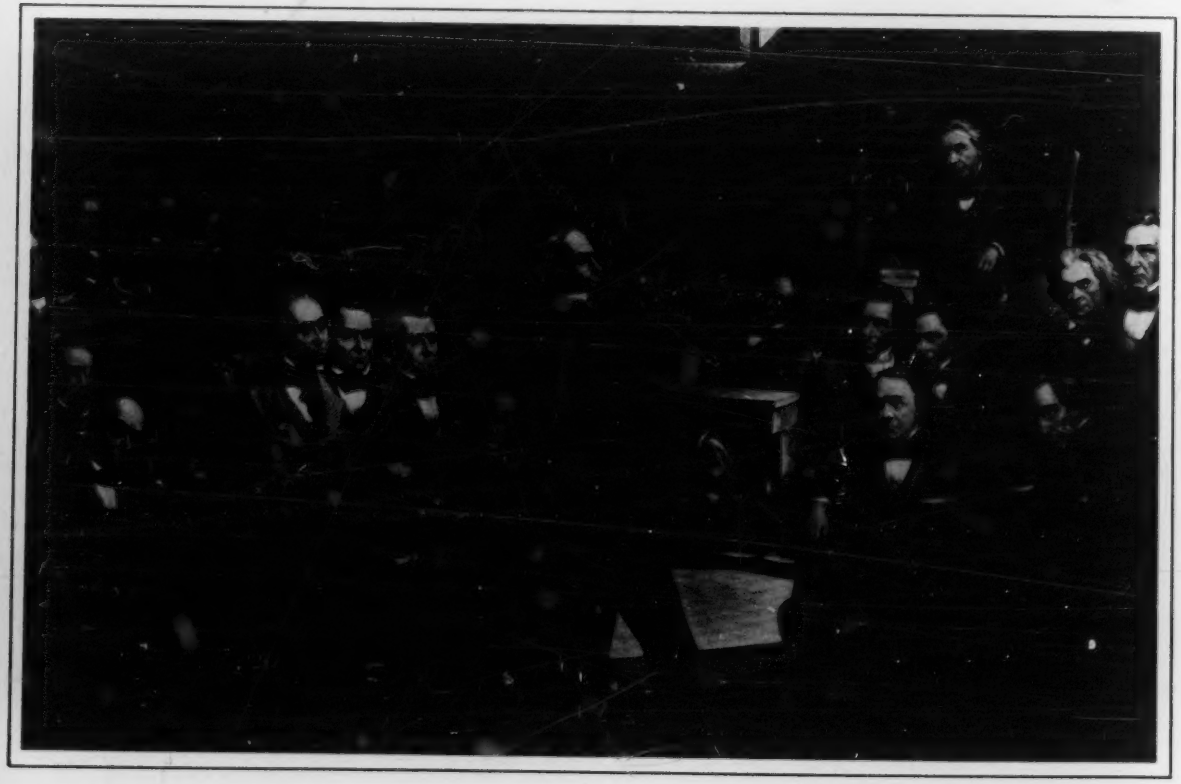
The Senate Chamber also saw fierce clashes over economic policy. Jackson's veto of legislation extending the life of the Second Bank of the United States directly led to the division of Congress into Democrats and Whigs. In March 1834 the Senate censured President Jackson for removing government funds from the Bank. "We are . . . in the midst of a revolution, hitherto bloodless, but rapidly tending towards a total change of the pure republican character of the Government, and to the concentration of all power in the hands of one man," warned Senator Henry Clay. [32] Then Jackson's forces rallied, led by Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, and in January 1837 ordered the Secretary of the Senate to draw black lines around the original censure resolution and write "Expunged by order of the Senate." [33]

In the 1840's problems of territorial expansion more deeply embroiled the Senate. Filibusters tied up its business over the settlement of the Oregon boundary and the Wilmot Proviso, prohibiting slavery in lands acquired during the Mexican War. The uncertainty of slavery in the California and southwestern territories revealed the need for a new compromise by 1850.

The dramatic debates of 1850 brought together for the last time the three mighty legislators of the era, Webster, Clay and Calhoun.

In the hope of halting sectional disintegration Henry Clay emerged from retirement and returned to the Senate. Although in his 73rd year, Clay was

hale and vigorous. The Kentuckian was known throughout the country for his bold, autocratic, magnetic, and fiery manner. This was coupled with a charm "so compelling that an opponent once declined a meeting which would subject him to the appeal of 'Harry of the West.'" He was Abraham Lincoln's "beau ideal," and fascinating even to his frequent adversary, John C. Calhoun, who stated: "I don't like Henry Clay. He is a bad man, an imposter, a creator of wicked schemes. I wouldn't speak to him, but by God, I love him." [34]



"The United States Senate, A.D. 1850," engraved by Robert Whitechurch after Peter Rothermel. Henry Clay presents his program of compromise to the Senate, presided over by Vice President Millard Fillmore. John C. Calhoun appears to the right of the Vice President and Daniel Webster is seated left foreground, head in hand.

He lacked the intellectual resources of Webster and Calhoun, but with a vision of America tantamount, he employed considerable talents to forge three great compromises, in 1820, 1833 and 1850, to preserve the Union.

According to the *Congressional Reminiscences* of a contemporary, John Wentworth, Clay was not like Calhoun with his masterful parliamentary speeches. His formidable reputation on the Senate floor was based on skillful debate rather than set or well-structured speeches. As Wentworth relates:

Although the Senate and galleries would always be filled when it was announced that Mr. Clay was to speak, yet it was always with the expectation and hope that some one would interrupt him, and a grand, intellectual sparring exposition would take place. Of all men whom I ever heard, I never knew one who could endure so much interruption and discuss so many side issues, and yet finish his speech with the entire facts and the entire line of argument marked out in his mind from the beginning, as Mr. Clay. Could the enemies of Mr. Clay have formed a combination never to interrupt him, nor be interrupted by him, they would have deprived him of much of his senatorial glory. The best speeches of Calhoun, Webster, and Benton were well considered, and read now much as when delivered. Not so with Mr. Clay's best speeches. They were unpremeditated, and as much a surprise to himself as to his audience. Short-hand reporting had not then reached its present condition. Thus, Clay must suffer with posterity incapable of hearing the varied intonations of his ever-pleasing voice, or of seeing his gesticulations, his rising upon his toes, his stamp of the foot, his march down the aisles until his long fingers would almost touch the president's desk, and his backward tread to his seat, all the while speaking; his shake of the head, his dangling hair, and his audience in the galleries rising and leaning over as if to catch every syllable.[35]

On January 29, 1850 Henry Clay took the floor of the Senate Chamber to present his program of compromise intended to reconcile the major issues dividing North and South. His proposals included entry of California as a free state, organization of the southwestern territories and their admission to statehood without restrictions, and separation of New Mexico from Texas with compensation to Texas for the loss.

Clay held up a wooden fragment from George Washington's coffin for emphasis and warned against adopting measures that might destroy the Union which had been cemented by Washington's "exertions and example." He declared that "the Constitution . . . was made, not merely for the generation which then existed, but for posterity, undefined, unlimited, permanent, and perpetual . . . and for every subsequent state which might come into the Union, binding themselves by that indissoluble bond." [36]

A mortally ill John C. Calhoun listens as his defense of the southern position is read to the Senate, March 4, 1850.

In response to Clay's proposals, Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, mortally ill but still spokesman for the South, made his last active appearance in the chamber on March 4, 1850. He once again had drafted an eloquent defense of the southern position, arguing that an exact political balance between the two regions had to be maintained.

Calhoun had been respected for decades because of the logical, disciplined nature of his thought and speeches. Webster considered him much the ablest man in the Senate, the greatest in

fact that he had met in public life. It was said that Calhoun could have surpassed Newton, Calvin and Locke as a logician.

Harriet Martineau had characterized Calhoun as "the cast iron man, with bristling hair and eyes that burned like heavy coals . . . who looks as if he had never been born and could never be extinguished." [37]

Another journalist, Oliver Dyer, included Calhoun in his list of *Great Senators*. Although Dyer was an abolitionist, he came to recognize Calhoun as a "high-toned, elegant gentleman, with a brilliant intellect, a sweet disposition, a sound heart, and a conscientious devotion to what he believed to be right." He described Calhoun's physical appearance: [38]

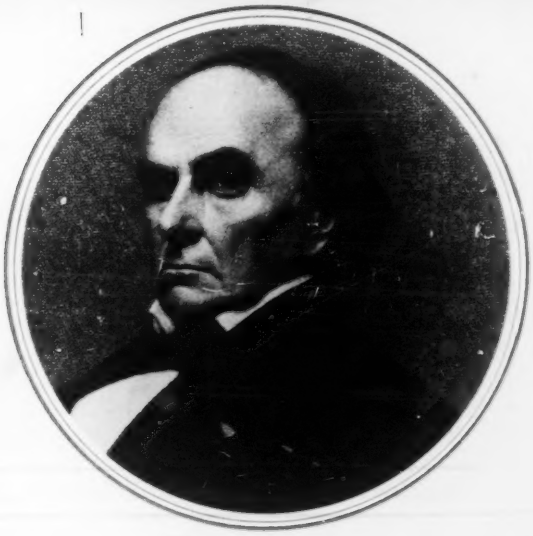
He was tall and gaunt. His complexion was dark and Indian-like, and there seemed to be an inner complexion of a dark soul shining out through the skin of the face. His eyes were large, black, piercing, scintillant. His hair was iron gray, and rising nearly straight from the scalp, fell over on all sides, and hung down in thick masses like a lion's mane. His features were strongly marked, and their expression was firm, stern, aggressive, threatening.[39]

Calhoun seldom addressed the Senate but when he did, his carefully reasoned speeches brought the previously scattered and indifferent attention of the group to a focus. On March 4 he was too sick to deliver the speech which he had prepared. Senator James M. Mason of Virginia read Calhoun's defiant words while the South Carolinian sat bundled in a cloak, "his eyes glowing with meteor-like brilliancy as he glanced at Senators upon whom he desired to have certain passages make an impression." [40]

The burden of responding to Calhoun fell to Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, called the "God-like Daniel" because of his physical appearance and oratorical power. [41] His dark complexion caused him to be likened to "a transparent bronze statue" when standing in the well of the Senate. [42] Dyer wrote:

He had broad shoulders, a deep chest, and a large frame. I have seen men taller than Webster; I have seen men larger; but I never saw anyone who looked so large. . . . The head, the face, the whole presence of Webster, was kingly, majestic, godlike. And when one heard him speak, he found that Webster's voice was just exactly the kind of voice that such a looking man ought to have. It was deep . . . with a thunder roll in it which, when let out to its full power, was awe inspiring. In ordinary speech its magnificent bass notes rolled forth like the rich tones of a deep-voiced organ. . . . He also had a faculty of magnifying a word into such prodigious volume and force that it would drop from his lips as a great boulder might drop through the ceiling, and jar the Senate Chamber like a clap of thunder. . . . And from this magnificent presence there emanated an atmosphere and sense of power . . . and whenever he was aroused, and began to put forth his power, one felt that it was measureless. . . .[43]

March 7, 1850—the day of Webster's response to Calhoun, brought expectant crowds to the Senate Chamber once again. The *Congressional Globe*, official record of legislative proceedings, and other contemporary accounts, describe the packed chamber, with women seated in senators' chairs



Daniel Webster

and documents piled high to provide additional seating. Webster pleaded the Union's cause, asking for conciliation and understanding. "I wish to speak today not as a Massachusetts man, not as a Northern man, but as an American. I speak today for the preservation of the Union. Hear me for my cause. . . ." [44]

Webster had spoken for a short time when the gaunt, bent form of Calhoun was assisted to his chair. He sat trembling, unnoticed by Webster. After several expressions of regret from Webster that illness had prevented the "distinguished Senator from South Carolina" from being present, Calhoun announced in a "clear and ghostly voice," that *"He is here."* [45]

Webster continued for three hours in support of Clay's program of compromise. He acknowledged the South's grievances but found the idea of secession totally unreasonable. "No, sir! No, sir! There will be no secession!" [46]

Many in the North denounced Webster for his accommodating words. His long-held Presidential ambitions were lost in the storm of anger from erstwhile supporters. Webster's speech did help to dispell the threat of imminent secession by the southern states, and after months of bitter struggle, Clay's resolutions became law. The Compromise of 1850 realized, Webster wrote: "We have now gone thro' the most important crisis, which has occurred since the foundation of the Government; and whatever party may prevail, hereafter, the Union stands firm. Faction, Disunion, and the love of mischief, are put under, at least for the present, and I hope for a long time." [47]

Only four years later, the peace that the Compromise had brought was shattered when Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas introduced the Kansas-Nebraska bill. This voided the Missouri Compromise and left the question of slavery in Kansas to the "popular sovereignty" of those settled there.

Again, the intensity of national feeling was mirrored on the Senate floor. Controversy surrounding the extension of slavery to Kansas had risen to a feverish level by the 19th and 20th of May 1856, when Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts delivered a five hour oration on "The Crime Against Kansas." A reporter observed that the galleries had not been so crowded in anticipation of a major address since the days of Webster. A new generation had succeeded Webster, Clay and Calhoun in the Senate.

Sumner's speech contained virulent personal attacks on Senators Douglas, James Mason and Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina. Butler's cousin, Congressman Preston Brooks took offense at Sumner's words, believing they "insulted South Carolina and [Senator] Butler grossly." [48] He felt duty-bound to avenge the honor of his aged kinsman and home state. Two days later, Brooks found the near-sighted Sumner seated at his desk in the Senate Chamber attending to his correspondence. Denouncing Sumner to his face, Brooks immediately raised his gold-topped cane over the Massachusetts senator, repeatedly striking him about the head and shoulders. When attempting to escape the blows, Sumner, acting almost unconsciously, rose and ripped his desk

Lithograph by John L. Magee depicting the caning of Senator Charles Sumner by Representative Preston Brooks, May 22, 1856

from where it had been bolted to the floor. The Massachusetts senator, as a result of his injuries, returned only intermittently to the chamber over the next three and a half years.[49]

"Bleeding Kansas" tore apart the nation and the party structure within the Senate, destroying the Whigs, dividing the Democrats, and creating the new Republican party. In this atmosphere of tension, the Senate moved to its new chamber in 1859 and on to the trials of the Civil War.

Over a century passed before the Senate Chamber of 1810–1859 would be returned to its mid-19th century appearance.

In 1860, a year after the Senate moved to its present chamber, the meetingplace of Webster, Clay and Calhoun was modified and rearranged to accommodate the Supreme Court of the United States. Moving up one story from its quarters on the ground floor, the Court continued to hold its regular sessions here, until it moved to its own building in the fall of 1935.

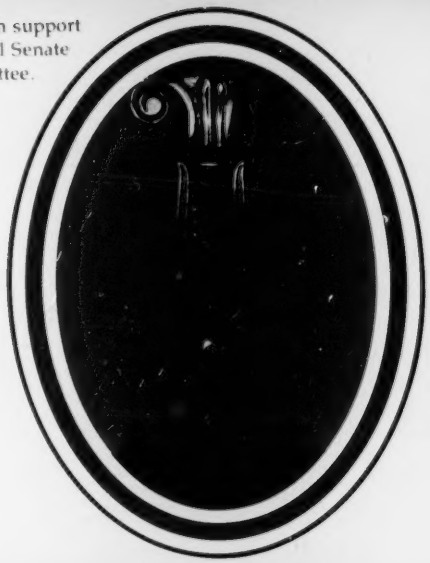
The effort to return the Old Senate Chamber to its present appearance dates from February 1934, when the Majority Leader of the Senate, Arkansas' Joseph Robinson, introduced a resolution providing that when the Supreme Court left the Capitol, its former chamber and that of the Senate, would be preserved and open to the public.

While the Court's scheduled move took place as planned, three decades would pass before the hopes of Robinson and his colleagues were revived. In 1964, through the dedicated efforts of Mississippi Senator John Stennis, funds were appropriated to undertake the research, working drawings, specifications and cost estimates for both the original Senate Chamber on the principal level of the Capitol, and the Supreme Court Chamber on the ground floor. This renewed interest was further strengthened in 1968 when the United States Senate Commission on Art and Antiquities was established. The authority given this five member group, headed by the Majority and Minority leaders, included the legislative responsibility for the restoration of the Old Senate and Old Supreme Court Chambers.

Under the direction of the Commission on Art and Antiquities, the long-held hope of restoration of the Old Senate Chamber was realized in 1976, the year of America's Bicentennial. Architectural historians, curators, librarians and archivists cooperated in the effort to consider all appropriate resources to achieve as accurate a re-creation as possible. Translating this wealth of detail into the finished chamber were scores of artisans, including skilled cabinetmakers, metalworkers, and stonemasons, working under the supervision of the Architect of the Capitol.

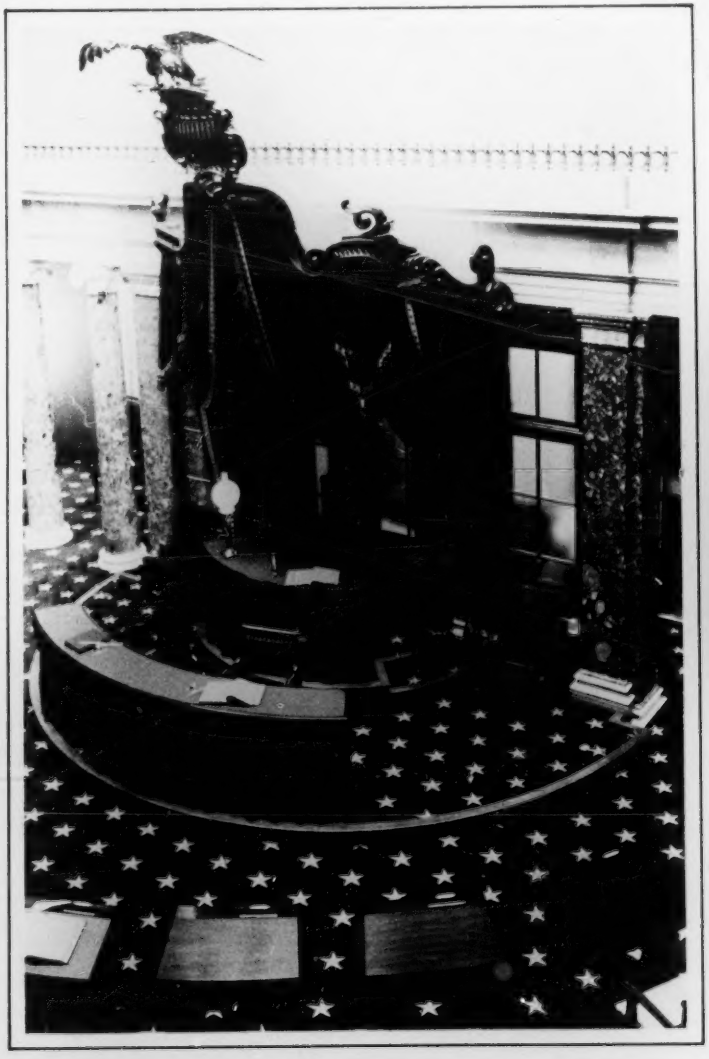
Today's visitor to the Old Senate Chamber will find reproductions of Members' desks arranged in four semi-circular rows. The original mahogany desks, which are located in the present Senate Chamber, were made by New York cabinetmaker Thomas Constantine, who in 1819 supplied "48 desks for Members, each $34."[50] Every desk bears a small ivory name plate with script lettering to identify the Senator to whom it was assigned. A silver-topped inkwell and small bottle of blotting sand are recessed in the upper right corner, reflecting a custom followed to this day. The

Senators' chairs follow an 1807 design by Englishman Thomas Hope, published in his book, *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration.* The original low-backed armchairs with slightly raked rear legs were also made by Thomas Constantine. Separated from the Senators' desks by a curved wooden balustrade, are reproductions of the red-upholstered sofas that accommodated privileged visitors to the chamber's "lower circle."



Detail of arm support from original Senate Chamber settee.

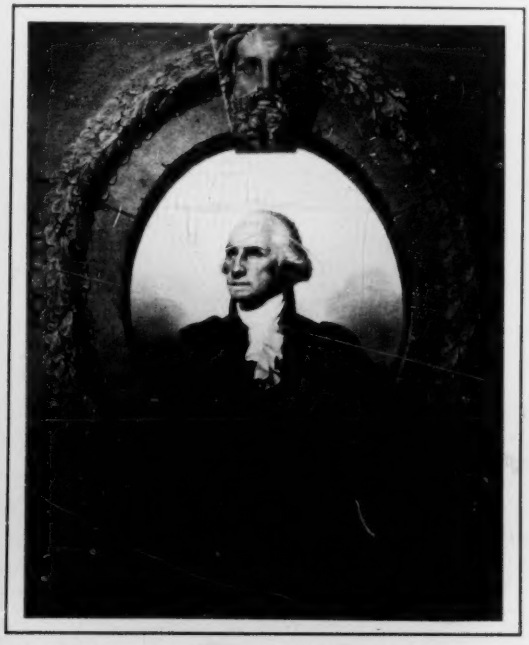
Senator's mahogany desk and chair.



View of the Vice President's dais from the gallery.

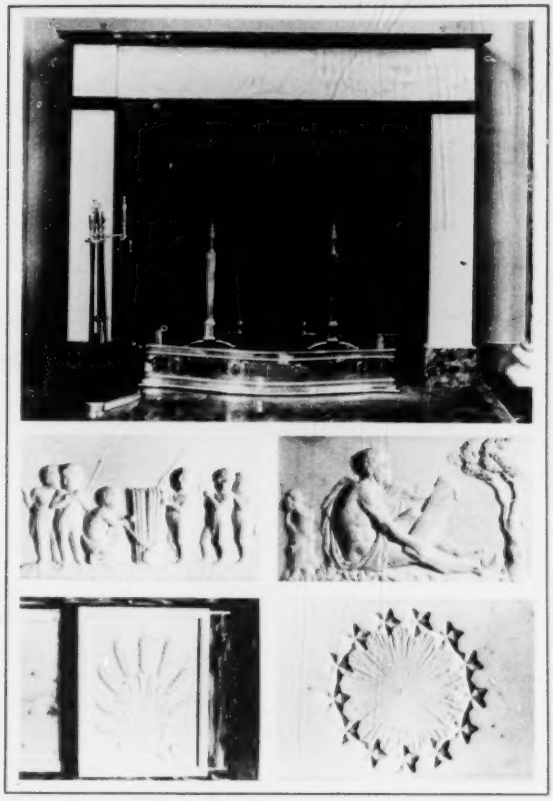
The Constitution provides that "The Vice-President of the United States shall be President of the Senate. . . ." (Art. I, Sec. 3). From an elevated dais in the center of the chamber Vice Presidents from George Clinton through John Breckinridge presided over the assembly. An 1839 guidebook describing the elegant treatment accorded this area of the room notes that the Vice President's chair "is canopied by crimson drapery, richly embossed and held by talons of an o'er hovering eagle." [51] The carved gilt eagle with shield has been returned to its original location.

Another original example from the pre-1860 chamber is the Vice President's desk, a curved table with ornately-carved legs surmounted by a star detail. In front of this desk has been placed a slightly larger table, used by the Secretary and the Chief Clerk of the Senate. Both desks again have been faced with red "modesty curtains." The officers' chairs are upholstered in red morocco leather which voucher material indicates was frequently used for the room's furnishings.



"Porthole" portrait of George Washington by Rembrandt Peale, painted in 1823.

Details of mantels designed for chamber, c. 1812 by Giovanni Andrei.



An original columnar solar lamp, associated with the 19th century Senate, has been placed on the Vice President's desk.

The Senate Chamber is lighted principally from above by a series of six skylights and a large brass chandelier. The chandelier's design is based on a lighting fixture made for the Senate in 1837 by the prominent Philadelphia firm, Cornelius and Co. The original Cornelius chandelier was a 24-light Argand fixture, modified in 1847 to burn gas. Double and single Argand lamps, also associated with the early chamber, are found on mantels in the loggia area, behind the Vice President's dais.

Throughout most of its history, red or crimson was a favored color in the Old Senate Chamber. In addition to the crimson hangings over the Vice President's chair, draperies of this color were used for the room's windows and galleries. The walls at

gallery level also were hung with swags of material suspended by gilt stars. The "star carpet," a patterned Brussels floor covering evident in many 19th century engravings, has been reproduced for the chamber. The carpet is marked by gold stars on a red background.

Above the east or marble gallery, "elegantly framed and draperied" is a portrait of George Washington by Rembrandt Peale.[52] It was purchased for the chamber in 1832 and the artist hoped it would become the "standard likeness" of Washington. Peale dressed his subject in black cloak and jabot and "framed" the first President with a painted stone "porthole" surrounded by an oak wreath and topped by a keystone bearing the head of Jupiter. This is the first of Peale's "porthole" portraits of Washington, and is regarded by art historians as the finest.

Among the earliest objects installed in the chamber are two white statuary mantels located on the east wall. Designed by Giovanni Andrei, the classical mantels were ordered by Benjamin Latrobe about 1812 from Traquair Marble Company of Philadelphia. Before they were shipped to Washington, however, the Capitol was destroyed by fire in 1814. During the rebuilding project, Latrobe learned that the mantelpieces had been crated for three years and were available for use in the Senate Chamber. Reproductions have been placed at the north and south ends of the Senate lobby. In addition to the fireplaces, the Senate Chamber was heated by two pyramid-shaped Franklin stoves, located in semi-circular niches on either side of the room's main entrance.

Notes

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Illustrations courtesy of: Architect of the Capitol, Government Printing Office, Harvard University Portrait Collection, Lars E. Janson, Library of Congress, and White House.

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The Old Senate Chamber in the U.S. Capitol is open each day of the week from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., except when in use for official ceremonial purposes. Closed Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Years' Day. For information, write the Curator, U.S. Senate Commission on Art and Antiquities, Washington, D.C. 20510 or telephone (202) 224-2955.

Mantel detail
in Old Senate
Chamber depicting
mace surmounted by
liberty cap